Beyond the Book: Unique and Rare Primary Sources for East Asian Studies Collected in North America


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I recently read Beyond the Book: Unique and Rare Primary Sources for East Asian Studies Collected in North America, edited by Jidong Yang. This book delves into the histories and cultures of East Asia by examining and describing in detail the rare, and very few, archival collections of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean history and culture available in United States and Canadian institutions such as Harvard, Stanford, and the University of Toronto. Yang highlights the richness and diversity of Asian history and the concerted effort that has gone into processing, conserving, and making accessible collections of manuscripts, rare books, photographs, and audiovisual materials documenting this history. Simultaneously, Yang argues that there are still many challenges to finding the hidden archival sources and materials relating to East Asian history, most notably that many people around the world may have materials sitting in their basements and attics, gathering dust, deteriorating, and forever becoming lost to history. Thus, there is a need for librarians and archivists to work collaboratively to seek out materials relating to East Asian history and make these materials more accessible while managing researchers’ unrealistic expectations. They should follow the belief that every piece of archival material can or should be digitized and freely available and accessible online.

As I was looking to expand my knowledge of Asian histories and cultures, I wasn’t able to find many materials available to me in the Midwest where I live. This book appealed to me because of the attention to detail given to each collection described. I like how Yang breaks down the collections, describing the materials’ condition, provenance, and access restrictions. The book also depicts the institution where the materials are housed, how and where to search online for digitized materials, conservation challenges, and projected timetables for when restricted and unprocessed materials will be available. The information presented in this book is relevant at present, but as more materials relating to East Asia are accessioned and processed in North America, the book may quickly become outdated. Anyone reading this book, from a researcher or scholar to a librarian or archivist, will appreciate Yang’s depth of detail and step-by-step description of how to access materials. I would recommend this book to anyone seeking a deeper understanding of East Asian archival materials available in North America and how librarians and
archivists can work together as a community to make more collections available and accessible to researchers around the world.